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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the impact of reflective teaching on the ability of preservice teachers to articulate a teaching philosophy. Three questions were explored: (1) how effective will a structure for reflecting be if used throughout a teacher education program? (2) how effectively will students be able to use that structure as a framework for developing a personalized philosophy of teaching? and (3) how effective will that instrument be for students in other teacher education programs? Participants were two professors and their graduate and undergraduate students enrolled in three teacher education programs for early childhood/elementary education. The data consisted of written reflections, journal entries, and papers describing the student's teaching philosophy. An instrument for guiding reflection was comprised of three questions regarding what the student had learned about children, teaching and learning, and about teacher role. Findings indicated that the instrument was beneficial in helping preservice teachers understand their readings and discuss course work and field experiences. Participants reported that the instrument helped them focus on critical incidents, provided opportunities for professors to understand issues around the cognitive conflicts experienced by students, enabled students to comment on classroom teacher's approach, and provided documentation of the growing understanding of the teaching role. As students progressed through their course work, they began taking ownership of their personal beliefs. Contains 10 references. (KDFB)

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HELPING PRESERVICE TEACHERS CONTSTRUCT THEIR OWN PHILOSOPHIES OF TEACHING THROUGH REFLECTION

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Helping Preservice Teachers Construct
Their Own Philosophies of Teaching Through Reflection

Introduction

In an effort to prepare teachers to serve 21st-century students, there is a call to reform teacher education. Reflective practitioners are more likely to understand their own individual role as "teacher." It is critical that teachers understand how children learn and develop as well as how students differ in their approach to learning. Beginning teachers will need to provide learning opportunities that support children's intellectual, social, and personal development. They must be reflective practitioners who continually evaluate the effects of their choices and actions on students, parents, and other professionals in the learning community (Ambach, 1996).

Helping perspective teachers understand their conception of their role as teacher is one the most perplexing objectives of a teacher education program (Harrington, 1994). Preservice teachers are exposed to different ways of learning and teaching as they progress through their teacher preparation programs. In the process of becoming a teacher, students are presented with a seemingly endless assortment of ideas, methods, philosophies, terminologies, theories, and generalizations. As part of their professional preparation, they are often asked to engage in self-reflection as they try to relate the theory presented in course work with the practice they observe in classrooms of young learners during their field experiences.

Traditional undergraduate students and more mature adults preparing for new careers, both undergraduate and graduate, experience the developmental task of constructing and reconstructing their professional identities (Rogers & Sluss, 1996). Engaging in inquiry and reflection provides opportunities for preservice teachers to understand pedagogy and children's thinking. Each preservice teacher must create a unique combination of ideas, methods, and philosophies as her/his personal interpretation, or philosophy, to what it is "to teach"(Henderson, 1992). For some students, it is a matter of applying their personal insights about their own learning to their own teaching. For others, however, they must clarify their personal ideas of what teaching is. As they reflect on their observations, they become involved in trying to resolve the cognitive conflict between what they *had* believed and thought about children and teaching and learning (Fosnot, 1989).

Teaching is much more than relaying information to students. It is a complex, collegial enterprise that is context-specific and requires deep knowledge and the ability to exercise expert judgment in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty (Buday & Kelly, 1996). Thoughtful decision making in the classroom is a critical component of teaching (Jarolimek & Foster, 1993). Habits of reflection are often stressed when preservice teachers are completing an extensive internship. Internships provide opportunities for preservice teachers to construct their own knowledge about whom they are as "teacher" and rediscover the linages they have previously discussed and experienced in their professional course work (Colton & Sparks-langer, 1993).

Research has shown, however, that during periods of stress and assuming responsibility for the classroom, student teachers are likely not to maintain their previous level of reflection (Kasten, 1993). The current study is an extension of earlier research and focuses on the implementation of a strategy for assisting preservice teachers develop their personal philosophy of teaching through reflection. The strategy was designed to assist preservice teachers identify critical events that happen throughout their program of study that have helped shape their personal philosophies.

Questions Guiding the Study

Obsrvations about the level or reflection demonstrated by preservice teachers and their ability to articulate a philosophy of teaching formed the basis for this study. The researchers identified three questions:

(1) How effective will a structure for reflecting be if used throughout a teacher education program, not just during an intership?
(2) How effectively will students be able to use that structure as a framework for developing a personalized philosophy of teaching?
(3) How effective will that instrument be for students in other teacher education programs?

Participants

Participants in this study were two professors and graduate and undergraduate students enrolled in teacher education programs for early childhood/elementary education. The participants included three groups:

(1) a professor and students at a private college located in a major urban community in the mid-Atlantic region.
(2) a professor and students at a state university located in a small urban community in the Northeast.
(3) a student at a state university located in the Midwest.

Sources of Data

Written reflections, journal entries, and papers describing a student's philosophy of teaching formed the data of the study. The written reflections and journal entries were assignments in several method courses and the seminar during the student teaching internship. Students wrote papers focusing on their philosophies of teaching prior to the student teaching internship and in the portfolios they developed as a culminating activity at the end of their program.

Instrument for Guiding Reflection

The instrument was developed by one of the professors as a means of providing assistance for the students to reflect on their experiences during the program. Students were asked to respond to three questions:

(1) What have I learned about children?
(2) What have I learned about teaching and learning?
(3) What have I learned about the role of the teacher?

Findings and Discussion

The data demonstrated that the instrument was beneficial in helping the preservice teachers "make sense" of what they were reading and discussing in their professional course work and what they were observing in related field experiences. Responding to the three questions, enabled all of the preservice teachers to move beyond their initial understanding of children and teaching. The study concurred with Eby's (1992) statement that effective teaching is fostered through reflecting actively and productively about students' needs, educational goals, the learning environment and one's own professional abilities.

Participants were asked if the instrument helped them focus on critical incidents. One participant who was midway through her program of study responded

> *At first I could not see the value in this exercise. But gradually, I became aware of a difference in my perceptions. I was beginning to see the interconnection between the guidelines for reflecting and my evolving personal philosophy of teaching. I realize now that a philosophy doesn't have to be static. It changes as I encounter new experiences.*

This response was representative of the views of the other participants, including the preservice teacher who was not enrolled in either of the professor's programs, but had telephone access to both professors if she had a question or needed clarification.

The participants who had used the instrument in one course had little difficulty using it in other courses. As they got closer to their internships, these preservice teachers were able to articulate their beliefs about children, teaching and learning, and the role of the teacher in discussing their personal philosophies. There was a small group of preservice teachers, at both schools, who required additional assistance in seeing the relationship between the reflections they had been doing and their personal philosophies of teaching.

The reflections provided opportunities for the professors to understand the issues around the cognitive conflict that the student was experiencing.

> *As I reflect upon my past years of education, through my newly discovered perspective as a prospective educator, images of my education development seem to be fragmented and inconsistent. I attribute much of this inconsistency to the lack of knowledge on how to interpret what the role of the teacher should be.*

Some preservice teachers found themselves working with classroom teachers who were not practicing what was presented in the course readings and discussions.

> <u>What I learned about teaching and learning</u>
> *I completely disagree with the dictation testing methods for reading spelling assessment. Last week the children were asked to write the middle sound in words such as "deer" and "meat." When a child is in the second month of first grade, the concept of middle, in relation to sound, is a difficult concept. There is an assumption of competency in relation to phonemic awareness that I don't find developmentally appropriate.*

Another student commented on the classroom teacher's approach to giving children choices.

> *I am constantly worried about children becoming hurt. I thought part of my philosophy of teaching involved giving children opportunities for making decisions. What I see in this class, is total chaos and tolerance of potentially hazardous behavior. If I am providing opportunities for children to make choices, is it not proper to provide guidelines for expectations for behavior? Now, I am wondering what type of philosophy I really have!*

During her initial field experience one student's response to what she learned about herself in the role of "teacher" was

I learned that I do not easily adapt to situations and learning environments that go against my beliefs on teaching and learning.

The reflection instrument provided documentation of the growth of understanding the intricacies of teaching and the emergence of what it is to be "teacher." During the first week of a methods course, after observing a group of four and five year old children, a student wrote:

What I learned about children:
Children have an amazing ability to understand and challenge themselves even at this young age. Watching and interacting with the children as they play chess is incredible. Once you tap into a child's interest, it is amazing what you can do.

What I learned about teaching and learning:
I don't really know!

What I learned about the role of the teacher:
Must be very enthusiastic and positive toward the children at all times. They need your constant reinforcement and encouragement.

During the third week of the course, the student demonstrated a clearer understanding about teaching and learning and the teacher's role.

What I learned about children:
Children show a lot by how they play. When I played with two boys, they wanted the dominate role. Two girls, the other hand, wanted me to be the "substitute" mother. It always depends on the personalities of the children. However, with the boys in particular, I was not at all surprised with how the roles for the game were carried out. I also noticed something about the age of the children. In my high school child development class, my teacher emphasized how important it is to notice the age difference between a four-year-old and a four and a half year old. The development and capabilities can be extremely different. I noticed this today with Frank. His language capabilities and knowledge base are delayed compared with the other children in this class. His birthday, however, indicates that he just turned four, while many of the other children are five or even five and one half years-old.

What I learned about teaching and learning:
Children need an immediate response for their actions. In a conflict between Ginny and David, something had to be done immediately. The

head teacher talked with David immediately after the situation occurred. Had she waited until later, he would not understand the consequences of his actions or maybe even what was wrong.

What I learned the role of the teacher:
The teacher needs to be a facilitator. For example, with the ant farm, it was provided by the teachers but the students found out the information they wanted to know. They used the ant farm to learn whatever they wanted, and the teachers just helped along the way.

The instrument proved beneficial in courses with the limited field experience of observing children on three different occasions. Marlene reflected on what she had learned during the course.

What I learned about children:
Children are all individuals and we must celebrate their differences! Children tend to take on roles as bosses during play and other children accept that. A teacher can interject during early childhood play and help that child develop better social skills and a higher level of play in a positive way.

What I learned about teaching and/or learning:
There are many different styles of learning and it is a teacher's responsibility to (reasonably) accommodate those learning styles.

What I learned about myself in the role of "teacher":
A teacher is not the sole director of learning but the facilitator of grasping a student's ability to bring what they have experienced previously to new ideas.

After observing a classroom on two different occasions a student wrote

What I learned about children:
It can be very difficult to figure out how to reach the children and what motivates them.

What I learned about teaching and/or learning:
Sometimes a lesson can be taught and it seems as though students were paying attention and understanding. But when you actually check to see what they are doing for independent work, some students have completely missed it!

What I learned about myself in the role of "teacher":
Even though I knew it before, it was even more apparent to me this week. You need to come up with unique strategies in dealing with individual kids in both instruction and classroom management.

Early in their professional course work, preservice teachers' philosophical base of teaching is often grounded in their own experience as learners. They identified with the philosophy that fit with their prior experiences. Suzanne, a graduate student in an intensive three semester program, wrote about her philosophy as she began her second semester.

> *My philosophy of teaching is based mainly on my own experiences as a student. I've taken notes on methods I've believed to be effective or ineffective. I've looked back fondly or with disdain on my own experiences in the classroom. The philosophy I have patch worked together from my experiences and observations and studies is most closely linked to constructivism.*

Another student wrote

> *My beliefs for my role as a teacher are a combination of two different educational philosophies; realism and pragmatism. However I find that I am comfortable with parts of each, but do not completely agree with either.*

This preservice teacher recognized that her philosophical belief was limited by writing before she had experienced some field work

> *However, until I am physically in the classroom experiencing my own self-search for my philosophical position, I will state my belief that children should be active participants.*

As students progressed through their professional course work, they began taking ownership of their personal beliefs about children, teaching and learning, and their role as a teacher. In her portfolio, Suzanne prefaced her discussion about her philosophy of teaching by explaining the process of her development.

> *When I first wrote a paper on my philosophy, I recognized the impact my own experience had on influencing my ideas. Now that I have completed my "formal" preparation, I realize that my philosophy will continue to grow. When I revisited the reflection forms, I have completed over the year, I can see how I have changed.*

The format in which she presented her philosophy changed as she became more comfortable with herself as "teacher."

> *Erika entered her new classroom very cautiously. She was still upset that she had to leave her friends and teacher when her family moved. She noticed the children were working at centers and in small groups. There was soft music playing in the background. Samples of the children's work were on the bulletin boards. At first she didn't see the teacher who was sitting with a small group of children using a balance scale. The teacher looked up smiling and started walking toward her. A girl took Erika's hand and said"Hi. I'm Alice and I'll show you around." At that moment Erika she decided that moving did not have to all bad.*

Implications

This study was centered on examining the use of an instrument to facilitate reflection. All participating preservice teachers demonstrated a positive change in their level of reflection. By focusing on the three questions, they were able to identify and examine critical incidents in their understanding of children and what it is to teach. An incidental, but rather important finding, was that the preservice teachers began to understand the complexities of teaching.

We cannot prepare our preservice teachers for every issue they may encounter, but through reflection they are able to come to understand that although there are commonalities among children, each child is a unique individual. Encouraging reflection about issues of teaching and learning in course work prior to the student teaching internship, gave some preservice teachers confidence that they will be able to make future decisions with a wider perspective. When a preservice teacher questioned their response to classroom situations, they were able to analyze the situation in terms of their personal beliefs about children, learning and teaching, and the role of the teacher. It will be interesting to see how this instrument will be used by preservice teachers after they complete their program of study. But that is a study that has yet to be undertaken.

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